

2018

## Transformative Teaching: Rewriting the World in the English Classroom through Literature

Patricia Hans

*Ridgewood High School & Bergen Community College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hans, Patricia (2018) "Transformative Teaching: Rewriting the World in the English Classroom through Literature," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 7 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol7/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Jersey English Journal by an authorized editor of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@montclair.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@montclair.edu).

# Transformative Teaching: Rewriting the World in the English Classroom through Literature

by Patricia Hans

A dear friend once told me that “thoughts can change the world,” to which I thoughtfully responded, “Yes, they can only if they are transformed into action.” Ralph Waldo Emerson once echoed the same sentiment. In a speech given to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in 1837, titled “The American Scholar,” Emerson spoke to the need for education to prepare students for life. “Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary,” Emerson proclaimed to his audience. To this end, he added that scholars must be: “men of action.” I agree. Ideas and pedagogy do nothing, if not followed by action.

Therefore, education must do more than prepare students to meet the challenges of the world. Education needs to empower students to take action to create a better world. Students need to be empowered because they need to move forward, to create, and to act, and not be acted upon. As English teachers, who have a plethora of rich literature from which to work, we must transform our students into thinkers and doers. But to do so means to move from a traditional curriculum that imprisons ideas within the walls of the classroom toward one that nurtures critical thinkers who will take action on the issues for the betterment of humankind. While this essay addresses only one approach to one issue, it stands as an example as to how teaching can be used to transform.

On a mission to prepare my students for a questionable future that demands a critically thinking electorate, I began revising our English 11H curriculum to direct it toward a theme of responsibility and rights. In the end, the first quarter became an intensive research-based essay unit that was organized around four issues: technology, race, education and climate change. Pertinent essays, rhetorical strategies, and authentic assessments made this 15-week unit particularly thought provoking

*New Jersey English Journal* 31

and provocative. However, provocative is seldom what an educator is looking for as criticism from politically minded parents whose claim that “this isn’t English at all!” is always imminent.

For example, last year, in my English 11 Honors class, excerpts from Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* brought our study of race in America to a close because the readings were deemed too political. Narratives that raised questions about race and what it means to be black in America were muted. Silenced were Twain and Baldwin. Obliterated were the ideas to which they spoke. “Make them feel unsettled,” Rankine’s

states. And this is what I tried to do. And while I believe educators need to address the elephant in the room, even if a couple of parents get rankled, I, in the end, shot the elephant. Only Orwell knows the burden that I carried as a result of backing down—ending before I had begun. But this year I did not; in fact, this year, I went national. As one of a panel of five educators who presented on teaching students to take action on climate change at the NCTE Convention in St. Louis this past November, I spoke of the need to empower our students by educating them on the issues not by showing, but by doing.

Specifically, on November 18, 2017, high school teachers from West Virginia and New Jersey, and college professors from Michigan and Minnesota, shared with an enthusiastic audience their strategies on how to teach students to take action through writing on climate change. They showed how to reframe traditional literary texts through an environmental lens; they showed how an issue as important as climate change can transform a skills-based research writing unit into a learning experience that can impact others and our world. They showed how students can read complex texts mindfully and employ Socratic methods of discussion to unravel the economic and political issues to which climate change is tethered. And as the teacher from New Jersey, I spoke of rights, and the rights that every student has to an education without impediment.

Furthermore, I spoke of the need for student empowerment through the acquisition of knowledge and how important it is for students to see themselves as viable members of a community with the same basic Constitutional rights that all citizens have. My presentation on teaching to climate change focused on what happens to us when those rights are violated.

To begin, every student has the right to an education that facilitates the free expression and exchange of ideas. Any impediment thereto would constitute a violation of this first amendment right. And air pollution, which has been tied to an increase in a myriad of afflictions from asthma to autism, limits the free exchange of ideas. Therefore, it is imperative that clean air be maintained in an educational environment, because it is a right afforded by the Constitution. But what if the State doesn't protect this right? What if this right is unintentionally, or deliberately ignored? The result could be a compromised learning environment because of physical and emotional health problems generated by poor air quality. But how do we hold the State accountable? This is what the students had to determine; therefore, we took the State to Court. In the end, the unit on "Climate Change" culminated in a Supreme Court simulation in which the students of Ridgewood High School, petitioners, would argue that the State of New Jersey, respondents, failed to take action to reduce the number of pollutants in the air in and around their school to meet EPA regulatory limits. In their argument, students accused the State of New Jersey of violating their Constitutional rights, and to argue this, they used scientific data and case law. We began by learning about climate change; we began with the science.

In the beginning were the words I used to begin the project. The Book of Genesis begins with these words. And at this moment of change in an attempt to bring students into the real world in an English classroom, those words felt right. I continued: About 252 million years ago, the earth nearly vanished



when 90% of life in the ocean and 70% of life on land died. While this near extinction, according to Peter Brannen, author of *The Ends of the World: Volcanic Apocalypses, Lethal Oceans, and Our Quest to Understand Earth's Past Mass Extinctions*, was caused by giant volcanic emissions of carbon dioxide, today's situation is caused by humans.

I looked around the room to see if they were interested and continued. Brannen states in his opinion, published in *The New York Times* on July 30th, 2017, that “We’re doing to the air today what volcanoes did 250 million years ago.” Specifically, an excess of carbon in the atmosphere will render seawater inhospitable to life, and life in the oceans has already begun to die. But while we are still a distance away from the scenario that took place 252 million years ago, when the earth nearly died, a dying process disrupts a delicately balanced ecosystem, which in time could evoke such horrors as world famine, climatic plagues, economic collapse and the destruction of our coastal cities and states.

This introduction was nothing short of fear mongering. The essay I selected to introduce them to climate change and what it means for us and our world in the near future completed a fearful picture. And while fear makes one attentive, it doesn’t make one understand an issue enough to be wedded to a cause.

Consider this part of the project exploratory in nature. Students read an alarmist essay, came into class worried the world will die in the next 20 years, and began to consider their futures. This is what “The Uninhabitable Earth,” by David Wallace-Wells that appeared in *New York Magazine*, on July 9, 2017, did. The threat the essay elicited as a result of the unabated warming of the earth’s atmosphere due to fossil fuel emissions was alarming. And the consequences from devastating floods, widespread epidemics, world famine, and fires, due to increased soil aridity, more than raised student concerns; they brought tears to their eyes. It also raised parental concern. And objections were voiced and parents

insisted that I teach to both sides of the issue. Political jousting is not what an English teacher typically encounters; nevertheless, I assured parents in a detailed project description that students would be researching all sides of the issue.

However, Wallace-Wells' essay in taking an extreme doomsday stance readily spurred further research, because it elicited reaction from scientists from all over the world-not. This prompted Wallace-Wells to publish an annotated version immediately thereafter, which included online responses from the science community. *The Atlantic* responded with a July 10th piece that addressed this doomsday scenario and pointed out that for the past couple of years the level of carbon in the atmosphere has stabilized. This, the article states, is due to car manufacturers producing more electric cars, and industry turning to solar and wind energy as a source of power. However, recent steps to deregulate EPA laws might negate this. It soon became clear to my students that climate change is not a science issue, but a political issue that everyone wants to avoid, until it becomes personal. This is what my students' position papers told me.

After my students read essays from opposing political fronts on climate change, and then integrated emerging ideas into one coherent argument, they advanced their positions on climate change in writing. From these essays, I learned that my students were more influenced by what they deemed is "morally" right, than their research. This was due to the overwhelming amount of information that they had at their disposal -- information that they had to carefully weed through. Interestingly, the more information they had, the more confused they became, and the less real and threatening climate change became to them. Instead they became disinterested. My students were not worried about climate change because, regardless of the doomsday predictions, they did not believe it would affect them personally. And this is how many people feel. To make this issue real, to make them understand climate

change in terms of responsibility and rights, I had to make it personal. To achieve this, I had to bring climate change home, put it on their doorsteps, so they could feel the negative effects.

What if the air they breathed was so foul that it compromised clarity, or prevented them from remembering? I needed to bring them there; I imagined a scenario, devised a fact pattern and wrote a statement of facts that would initiate our moot court: “On September 12th, 30% of the population of Metropolitan High School in the city of Metropolitan, were out sick due to asthma-like attacks and nausea. In June, OSHA was called in to investigate the school’s air quality and levels of water contamination. The result of their findings was not published; however, 20 students under the Freedom of Information Act did obtain a copy of the report from which they learned that the presence of methane gas exceeded the accepted percentages dictated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and The Clean Air Act, 42 U.S.C. §7401 et seq. (1970). The Clean Air Act (CAA) is the comprehensive federal law that regulates air emissions from stationary and mobile sources. In February of 2016, the EPA recommended that all schools conduct a clean-up of the areas around them to work toward removing environmental toxins that stemmed from the use of pesticides. The Clean Air Act includes a list of 187 of these pollutants, which the air around Metropolitan High School was determined to have an excess of 93 of these pollutants that rendered the air toxic in and around the school.” The statement of facts continues:

The source of the contamination is under investigation; nevertheless these twenty students have banded together to hold the Federal and State Government accountable, and require that they review existing regulations and strengthen them to ensure that the air that we breathe and the water that students drink are free of elements that can cause students to become seriously ill affecting their well-being and depriving them of an education that the Constitution, specifically the 14th Amendment

provides for them.

It was assumed that the case had made it up to the Supreme Court. And following the days devoted to case law research, the hearing commenced. There would be four attorneys for the student-petitioners, and four student-attorneys would represent the respondents, or the State of New Jersey. Nine student-justices would hear the case. Written arguments would be orally delivered.

To prepare for the hearing, students had to research and study closely the Constitution in addition to case law. They had to gather their findings, analyze, assess and select relevant cases that they could use in support of their petition. Arguments were written collaboratively; evidence consisted of EPA regulations, any State legislative actions, and recent case law. In the hearing, the petitioners argued that students have the right to clean air in mandated educational environments, and that the State of New Jersey under the authority of the Federal Government, has not ensured these rights.

The following is an excerpt from the student-petitioners' argument: America was founded upon the concept that all people are created equally, and that they are endowed by their creator with specific unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Our founding fathers formed a general consensus that Americans should have opportunities to succeed, no matter what kind of environment they were born into. When recognizing human rights, we are usually discussing certain fundamental concepts, and while some human rights are even more basic to understand, like the right to breathe in clean air, this is a right that in recent years has been negated. It is the government's obligation to protect human rights that polluters threaten. It is necessary for life itself to live in a society free of impediments that might deprive us of these rights. If a right such as the right to freedom of expression is at all jeopardized, should it not be the government's job to seek for change and promote the

protection of the people?

While one might think that the Court, comprised of nine student justices, would rule in favor of the petitioners, it did not. In the majority opinion, which was collaboratively written, the Court states: In *Hood vs. Suffolk City School District* and *Collins vs. The City of Harker Heights*, the plaintiffs argued that their constitutional rights afforded by the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment were violated. They argued that pollutants, including mold and other harmful materials in the air, damaged their health conditions. However, true to both cases, the Supreme Court argued that the government was not at fault for these occurrences of poor health.

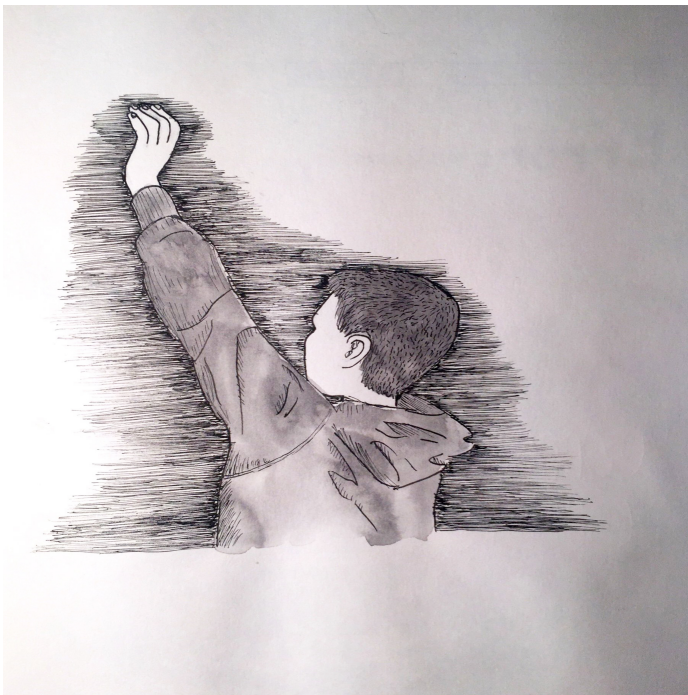
The court's decision was surprising. Student justices ruled in favor of the State writing in their written opinion that case law provided "an already stable legal blueprint" for their decision "regardless of the weight that Article I of the New Jersey State Constitution carries that all people are by nature free and independent, that they have certain natural and unalienable rights, among which are those of enjoying and defending life and liberty, of acquiring, possessing and protecting property, and of pursuing and obtaining safety and happiness." And that while all political power is inherent in the people, and government is instituted for the protection, security and benefit of the people, the Court ruled in favor of the State because legal precedent dictated, regardless of moral and Constitutional claims.

In the end, the students were amazed at what they were able to do. In written and oral de-briefing sessions they stated that they learned how to craft an argument that was so well organized and substantiated that they were able to understand it when it was orally delivered. Doing this legitimized for them the act of writing. Furthermore, the simulation gave them new confidence in oral argument because they understood the issues so well that they were able to think quickly on their feet and field questions from the justices. They also came to understand the importance of educating themselves on

the issues, and began to see themselves as future citizens. In addition, they learned that what might be deemed morally right, may not be legally right. And this was the most profound take-away. Finally, they also stated that they learned of the complexities of climate change and how it will directly and indirectly affect everyone, and that they have a responsibility to act to preserve our world.

If the purpose of education is to teach and prepare our students to meet the demands of a challenging global environment that will require our students to mitigate the effects of past industrial practices to preserve the earth and to create a world in which everyone has an opportunity to succeed, then it is time we all take action and teach for the future on this issue, as well as on others. How important is it to you, to humankind, to create critically thinking citizens in whose hands will rest the future of our world? This is a question I pose for the reader.

**Patricia L Hans**, teaches English and American Studies at Ridgewood High School, Ridgewood, NJ, is an adjunct professor at Bergen Community College, Paramus, NJ, and holds an EdM from Teachers College, Columbia University in New York.



By Izzy Boyce-Blanchard who is studying at the School of Visual Arts in NYC. He is from Rumson, NJ